

Past President's Panel Introduction: The Contemporary Relevance of Ancient Philosophy

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In the fall of 2023, there was a TikTok trend where filmers would ask men how often they think about Rome, and the men would answer that they thought about Rome many times a day. It's pretty hilarious, just as a bit of web-based anthropology. Given that I work in ancient philosophy, and particularly on late Republican receptions of Hellenistic thought, my daughter knew she would have some golden content if she asked me. My answer: "I was *just thinking* about the connection between Cato's Stoicism and his commitment to Republicanism!" That video is now her most liked (partly because we did a jump cut to me wearing a Roman Senator's outfit for the delivery!)

The resonance of the ancient Greek and Roman thinkers with contemporary theory is sometimes harmonious, and sometimes cacophonous. These thinkers broke so much ground and were exemplars along many lines, but they are also deeply morally alien. They strove for intellectual honesty and tried to articulate visions of justice and human flourishing, but they did so with a high tolerance for casual violence, stratified societies, and profound sexism.¹ It is against this conflicted backdrop of admiration and critical distance that we should ask: *what in ancient philosophy is relevant for us?*

Julian Rome, with "Plato's *Republic* Today: A Queer Utopia?," argues that Plato's *kalliopolis* "depicts a social arrangement that depends on an anti-essentialist concept of gender and displaces reproductive family units as the central organizing units of society" (2024, p. 13). The perfect city, in Plato's utopian fashion, reveals that hetero- and cis-normative social arrangements are contingent, and society can be arranged otherwise. This vision is posed as a counterpoint to the patriarchal and colonialist utopian appropriations of Plato's great work, but Rome acknowledges the limits of this approach. The *kalliopolis*'s program of eugenics and limits on individual liberty are "not the sort of queer utopian picture we want to arrive at" (2024, p. 14). These traditions are still, as it were, a mixed bag.

Gabriella Cunningham (2024) argues that interpretations of Plato's *Symposium* with the tragedian Agathon as a minor and disappointing character have missed an opportunity to theorize philosophical progress. Agathon's training under Gorgias has made him into an imitator of the great rhetorician, with his praise of Eros mimicking Gorgias's *Encomium*

of Helen. But Agathon shows growth in his interactions with Socrates. He is “the only speaker to praise Eros itself” (2024, p. 21), which by Platonic reckoning is a profound insight. Agathon, on Socrates’s estimate, covers the same ground as Socrates when he’d begun thinking about love, and Agathon is the only one of the speakers to admit he does not know at the end of Socrates’s questioning. Finally, Agathon persists in his philosophical engagement, being the one to stay up late with Socrates investigating poetry and tragedy’s varieties. Agathon has been, by Cunningham’s lights, “wrongly overlooked” (2024, p. 19). And so, as with so many characters in Platonic dialogues, we have a study in intellectual character – in this case, that of a promising mind working to overcome early miseducation. By analogy, surely any professor among us can tell a similar story of the bright students who needs more deprogramming from toxic intellectual culture than they need of positive instruction. Cunningham’s view, then, not only is that there is a novel approach to the *Symposium*, but there is a budding model for *protrepics* with our philosophical education.

Lucy Alsip Vollbrecht asks the question whether skeptics can be feminists or feminists can be skeptics. She observes the tension: “As an epistemologist, I am sympathetic with skepticism, but as a feminist, I am concerned by it” (2024, p. 5).² The problem is that the ancient skeptics, and the Pyrrhonians in particular, suspend judgment but then go along with dominant cultural norms to live their (non-philosophical) lives.³ In societies of rank injustice, this is objectionable complicity. Alsip Vollbrecht adds a contemporary instrument to the skeptic’s toolbelt: the likelihood that widespread implicit bias in philosophy “looks like a defeater for our philosophical conclusions so far” (2024, p. 8). This is both a feminist insight and a skeptical result. There is a kind of convergence, then, between skeptical programs and feminist challenges to the status quo. And the further project of thinking through this challenge is to construct, in Pyrrhonian equipollence-producing fashion, a counterpoint to the overwhelmingly male-dominated canon. A number of programs of philosophically contraposed cases are to be made for the feminist perspective: “*A true counter-view is a canon without implicit bias*” (2024, p. 8 [emphasis in original]). In this regard, Alsip Vollbrecht argues, feminists “can harness the power of skeptical method to anti-skeptical ends” (2024, p. 7). And so, by her lights, the conflicted legacy of the ancients has more useful contents than otherwise expected.

This optimistic outlook is not shared by Glenn Trujillo (2024, p. 25), who argues in “Stoicism Sucks” that “Stoicism has become a plague of bro-y, shallow, self-help-y, garbage.” And though this is overwhelmingly the fault of those who have appropriated the tradition in this fashion, the tradition itself bears a weighty measure of blame, too.⁴ It is all-too-easily

taken in this direction by its core theses. Stoic ethics, as Trujillo puts it, “reads as a litany of moral failures” (2024, p. 26). The Stoics held that virtue is the only good and that it is a matter purely of knowledge, so external goods such as just states or good friends are not true goods. There is a good deal of theoretical double-talk in Stoicism for these things to be still ‘preferred indifferents,’ but Trujillo asks “how can anyone use this system without sounding like a psychopath?” (2024, p. 27).⁵ The proportions of Stoicism’s mixed bag tilts toward bad.

The image that I believe emerges from these short provocations in this year’s Past President’s Panel is a mature engagement with our philosophical forebears. We can honor their insights and the traditions of critical reflection they spawned without being mere mimics of or simple commentators on them. In fact, a longstanding hope of training in the history of philosophy is to provide ourselves with object lessons in how philosophy is done – both in refining our insights and in making interesting or at least instructive errors. Charting this history, even in critically rejecting large swaths of traditional content or in seeing new paths for its uptake and application, provides us with a vocabulary and repository of ideas for our own philosophizing – even if we venture well beyond where those ancients might have anticipated.

Notes

¹ Emily McGill and I have reviewed this problem for Stoicism, in particular, and we term this the “uneven track record” with the tradition on, perhaps, too many issues (2014).

² Alsip Vollbrecht has on-record cases for the connection between deep feminist commitments and skeptical philosophical method in argumentative exchange. See her recent “Why We Need Skepticism in Argument” (2022).

³ See Aikin (2020) for an overview of the skeptical challenges to philosophical criteria and the ironic conservative bent of Pyrrhonian practical life.

⁴ For another case along these lines, see Alyssa Lowery’s “The Promises and Problems of Two Stoic Big Tents” (2022).

⁵ The challenge has been framed in my recent work (Aikin and Stephens, 2023) as the ‘ruin problem,’ to which there are not any particularly good answers coming from Stoics. Additionally, Aikin and Trujillo (forthcoming) make the case that the Cynics come unsettlingly too close to this view, too.

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